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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the notion of experiential learning, described as an effort to foster the development of the learner as both a person and a language user. Definitions and discussions of implementation strategies for experiential language learning are provided, followed by an examination of ways in which the linguistic content of a course can be specified. Techniques and human relations aspects of experiential learning are also discussed. It is suggested that experiential learning entails a shift of attention to personal relationships and experiences, and that the way a teacher works with the material is more important than the material itself. Contains 60 references. (LB)

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SYLLABUSES, MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES IN EXPERIENTIAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses first the notion of experiential learning, which is seen as an effort to foster the development of the learner both as a person and as a language user and learner. As a process-oriented approach, experiential learning encourages learner initiative and self-direction. Individually and in small groups, the learner will increasingly assume the responsibility of defining his learning objectives and setting the tasks, deciding on the contents and ways of working on them, and evaluating the results. In a similarly process-oriented view of teaching, the teacher is seen as a researcher of his own work, functioning as a guide and facilitator of student learning. Teaching involves making choices, and to be able to make informed choices the teacher needs information about the learner's situation, and theory-based concepts to reflect on the choices. Experiential learning entails a shift of attention to personal relationships and experiences. It is not so much the material or technique itself as the way in which the teacher works with it that makes the difference. In this sense it can perhaps be said that the most important pedagogical innovation is the teacher himself, his pedagogical thinking and personal qualities and attitudes.

1. WHAT IS EXPERIENTIAL LANGUAGE LEARNING?

1.1. A model of experiential learning. The basic tenet in experiential learning is that experience plays a significant role in learning. The term experiential learning is used to refer to a wide range of educational programmes combining the components of work and academic study: cooperative education (which integrates classroom experience with practical work in industrial, business, government or service organizations), various public service internships, service learning, field-based placements and field research, work/study assignments, structured exercises and role plays, gaming simulations, clinical experience, overseas educational programs, etc. All of these contain a common element of learning from immediate experience (cf. Knapp and Davis 1978). As

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Keeton and Tate (1978,2) put it, experiential learning refers to learning in which

> the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with learning in which the learner only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about these realities but never comes in contact with them as part of the learning process. ... It involves direct encounter with the phenomenon being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter or only considering the possibility of doing something with it.

Experiential learning thus involves both observing the phenomenon and doing something with it. The use of the experiential component in the learning process can serve a number of purposes: to test a theory, to improve a skill, or to achieve a desired result by applying theory.

The foundations of experiential learning can be traced back to Dewey's progressive approach, Lewin's social psychology, Piaget's work on developmental cognitive psychology, and humanistic psychology. Common to all of these is an emphasis on development toward a purposeful life and self-direction as the organizing principle of education. These approaches will be discussed briefly in this section (cf. Kolb 1984,5-19).

In his well-known progressive approach, Dewey (1938) emphasized the importance of "learning by doing", whereby experience acts as an organizing focus for learning. Dewey described his approach as cultivation of individuality, free activity, learning through personal experience, and a dynamic, here-and-now view of learning for current relevance. Lewin's work (1951) on group dynamics and the methodology of action research has been very influential. In his T-groups he made the important discovery that learning is best facilitated in an environment where there is a tension between immediate, concrete experience and analytic detachment and reflection. Lewin noted that learning must also include an element of concept formation, aiming thereby towards an integration of theory and practice. His famous saying, "there is nothing so practical as a good theory", symbolizes his commitment to the integration of scientific inquiry and practical problem solving.

Piaget's classical work on developmental psychology led him to discover age-related regularities in children's reasoning processes, and how intelligence is gradually shaped by experience. Intelligence is a product of the interaction between the child and his environment. Thus the powers of abstract reasoning and symbol manipulation can be traced back to the infant's actions in exploring and coping with his immediate environment, whereby experience is

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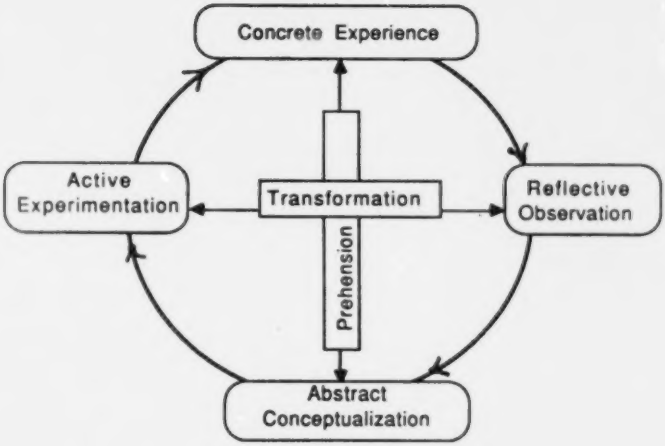
translated into a model of the world. Piaget claimed that the child's system of knowing changes qualitatively in successively identifiable stages. What is involved in the development is the question of representation: how the child gets free of present stimuli and conserves past experience in a model, and how he retrieves information from this model. At the enactive stage, knowledge is represented in concrete actions and is not separable from concrete experience. At the iconic stage, knowledge is represented in images which become increasingly autonomous from the experiences that they represent. Finally, at the stages of concrete and formal operations, knowledge is represented in symbolic terms, and the symbols can be manipulated internally with an increasing independence from the experiential reality.

While Piaget's cognitive stages terminated at adolescence, humanistic psychology has also provided a perspective for adult development, fitting well with Piaget's ideas. Humanistic psychology provides a holistic framework for describing development and the challenges that it poses, emphasizing the importance of affective experience and socio-emotional development throughout the life cycle. For Kelly (1955) and Rogers (1969;1975), experiential learning refers to the perception and interpretation of the world of experience through personal constructs, and making plans on the basis of anticipated outcomes. Such constructs are abstracted from experience and will change over time as a result of exposure to new events which do not conform to the existing system of constructs. Each individual develops a construct system which he uses to interpret experience. Learning will lead to a better understanding of oneself as a human being.

On the basis of these important predecessors, Kolb (1984,42) advances a general theoretical model of experiential learning, integrating the views of Lewin, Dewey and Piaget:



According to the model, learning is essentially seen as a process of resolution of conflicts between two dialectically opposed dimensions, called the "prehension" and "transformation" dimensions.

(1) the **prehension** dimension refers to the way in which the individual grasps experience. The dimension can be seen as two modes of knowing, ranging from what Kolb calls grasping via "apprehension" to what he calls grasping via "comprehension". Apprehension is instant, intuitive knowledge without any need for rational inquiry or analytical confirmation. The other end of the dimension, grasping via comprehension, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of conscious awareness in learning, whereby comprehension introduces order and predictability to the flow of apprehended sensations. This dimension is thus concerned with the ways of grasping reality through varying degrees of emphasis on unconscious apprehension or conscious comprehension.

(2) the **transformation** dimension, on the other hand, refers to the transformation of experience by an orientation towards reflective observation as against action and active experimentation. An individual with an active orientation is ready to take risks, attempting to maximize success and showing little concern for errors or failure. An individual with an excessive reflective orientation, on the other hand, may be

willing to sacrifice successful performance to avoid errors, preferring to transform experiences through reflective observation. (Kolb 1984,42-60.)

Kolb (1984,74) points out that the dimensions are theoretically not unitary, i.e., a high score on one dimension does not automatically imply a low score on its opposite. Rather, they might be seen as dialectically opposed, whereby a higher-order synthesis of opposing orientations makes highly developed strengths in opposite orientations possible.

The polar ends of the two dimensions will thus yield four orientations to learning:

(1) **concrete experience**, with an involvement in personal experiences and an emphasis on feeling over thinking. This is an "artistic" orientation relying on intuitive decision-making.

(2) **abstract conceptualization**, using logic and a systematic approach to problem-solving, with an emphasis on thinking, manipulation of abstract symbols and a tendency to neat and precise conceptual systems.

(3) **reflective observation**, focussing on understanding the meaning of ideas and situations by careful observation, being concerned with how things happen by attempting to see things from different perspectives and relying on own thoughts, feelings and judgement.

(4) **active experimentation**, with an emphasis on practical applications and getting things done, influencing people and changing situations, and taking risks in order to accomplish things. (Kolb 1984,68-69.)

Experiential learning is, however, seen as a four-stage cycle combining all of these orientations on the two dimensions. Thus a simple observation of experience is not sufficient for learning; something must also be done with the experience, and there must be something to be transformed, some experience that is being acted upon. A complete learning process requires the whole cycle with a dialectic interplay between the contrasted abilities. This is why learners must be helped to develop all the abilities as fully as possible. Thus, if one or more of these learning modes remains seriously underdeveloped, the learner may be unable to complete the cycle successfully. It can be said, in fact, that any learning process requires an experiential phase in order for complete learning to occur, as experience functions as a laboratory for testing and refining the theory of action.

1.2. Experiential foreign language learning. Experiential foreign language learning is seen as an effort to foster the development of the learner both as a person and as a language user

and learner, thereby supporting both his personal, social and cognitive development. From the point of view of personal growth, experiential learning aims to support the development of the learner's personality by increasing, partly through the medium of the foreign language, his awareness of his own values and ways of categorizing the world, thereby helping him to arrive at a better understanding of himself and the rest of the world. In this sense experiential learning is personality development enabling the learner to become increasingly self-directed and responsible for his own learning. This process means a gradual shift of the initiative to the learner, encouraging him to bring in his own contributions and experiences. Instead of the teacher setting the tasks and standards of acceptable performance, the learner is increasingly in charge of his own learning. At the same time, learning involves an element of empathic listening to others and getting to know them better through using the foreign language. Thus it also involves social development and has the development of group dynamics as an important element. Personal and social development support each other, as a person with a reasonably balanced self-concept is likely be able to co-operate with others in a constructive way.

The development of learner initiative is connected with the involvement of the learner in the task at hand. Materials and tasks do not as such guarantee anything; the essential question is what the learner does with them. It is important that the learner **does something** to the input so that the output becomes his own and has a personal meaning for him, no matter how modest such modifications or productions are in the beginning. An input which is not worked on by the learner has not much subjective meaning for him. It is not a real output. It could be rather described as **throughput** - output which is unmodified input and does not touch the learner inside. It can thus be said that a meaningful output is based on a "digested" input which is somehow modified by the learner and thereby becomes his own. This is a matter of the quality of internal processing.

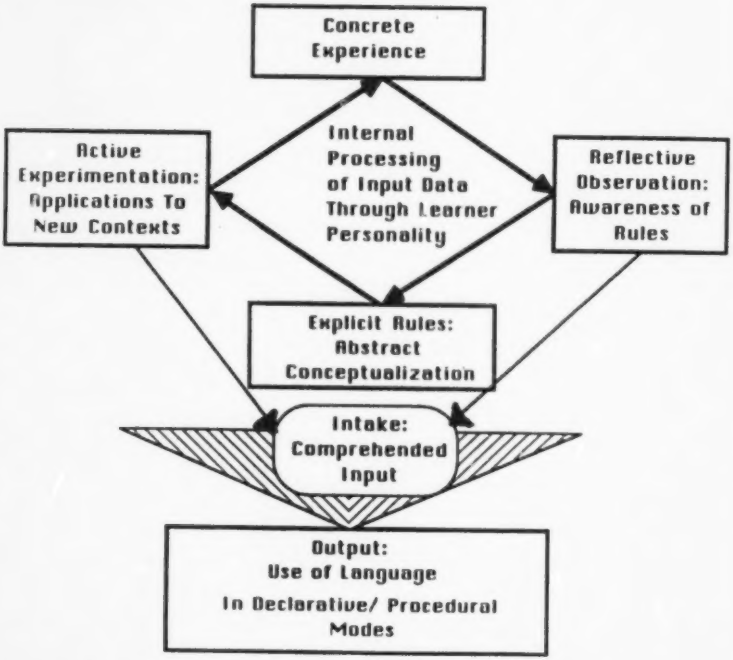
From the communicative point of view, then, experiential learning means encouraging authentic, communicatively relevant language use. Learners are brought in touch with real-life language use, involving some reason for reading a text or listening to somebody. The activity becomes purposeful precisely because of such communicative reasons. In spoken language use, interactions usually involve a small number of speakers, in which conversational roles and meanings are constantly negotiated. The roles of the speaker and listener may change rapidly, and the dialogues are not so "tidy" as suggested by textbook dialogues: people will hesitate and misunderstand each other, ask for clarification and check their interpretations, interrupt and get distracted by other people and

events. They communicate not only through words but also through facial expressions, gestures and other means of non-verbal communication, which are important for the flow of conversation. They negotiate meanings in subtle ways, with implicit meanings being an important part of communication. In real life, people are also tired, bored, angry, in a hurry, affectionate, nervous, relaxed, polite, impolite, etc., and such properties are reflected in their language use. Learners need experiences of these aspects of language use, too, and such data might, indeed, provide interesting learning material.

The development of communicative skills requires both "closed" and "open" tasks and situations. Structured exercises are typically controlled environments designed to screen out distractions and surprises, so that the learner's attention can be focused on the learning at hand. A problem with such exercises is, however, that they tend to be uninteresting because of this obvious intent on learning. Besides, they do not prepare the learner to cope with real communicative situations which involve making decisions and interpretations on the basis of incomplete information. The automatization of sub-skills is essential for the development of fluency, as it frees processing capacity for dealing with message contents. The development of fluency involves what Glaser (1985) has called the "orchestration of task components". Complex tasks are seen as consisting of subtasks and their components. The various subroutines may be learned independently, but eventually they will be integrated to attain more complex skills. In communication all linguistic levels thus work together simultaneously and in real time for the production or interpretation of intended meanings to be fluent. The development of such global comprehension and production skills requires practice on demanding open tasks. Language use means coming to terms also with the unforeseen, the irrelevant and the unpredictable. This experiential stage involves work on authentic materials, whereby "authentic" refers to material that is not designed for learning purposes.

Experiential learning suggests that the learning of grammatical rules might be seen as a recycling process gradually leading to their internalization. When the process proceeds from "implicit" to "explicit" learning, the learner is first provided experiences of the new forms through a meaningful use in natural contexts. At this stage, the rules are not presented or explained formally, only their meanings are provided in the mother tongue. Rules are thus approached as lexical units in the first place, thereby simulating first-language acquisition. The learner makes observations and reflects on them, becoming aware of linguistic forms and possibly making his own implicit rules. He may check their applicability by asking the teacher. Formal presentation, however, will follow only after the learner has had experiences of the rules by being exposed

to language in relevant contexts of use. Explicit comprehension of the rules will enable the learner to control them consciously. To secure automatization, the rules are used in new contexts. The experiential learning cycle can thus be presented as follows, following Kolb's model:


Concrete Experience
Active Experimentation: Applications To New Contexts
Internal Processing of Input Data Through Learner Personality
Reflective Observation: Awareness of Rules
Explicit Rules: Abstract Conceptualization
Intake: Comprehended Input
Output: Use of Language In Declarative/ Procedural Modes

According to the model, a complete learning cycle requires experience, reflection, conceptualization and active experimentation. Just as rules without a sufficient experiential element are not enough, experiences that are not reflected upon and conceptualized will not yield a full measure of learning, and reflections must in turn aim at testing the newly refined understanding of the system by further experience. Language learning is thus a continuous process of recycling the input data and aiming at a more sophisticated understanding of the system. Internalized input constitutes the learner's intake, his communicative competence.

In the light of this model, it is interesting to reflect on the relative strengths and weaknesses of various methodological trends in language teaching. Traditional language teaching, the grammar-translation method, was strong on abstract conceptualization, providing learners with a good knowledge of the rules, but tended to be weaker on the element of sufficient active language use. The explicit knowledge of rules did not automatically turn into fluency. The audio-lingual method was developed as a reaction against this emphasis on rules, but it went too far in the new emphasis on language use and neglected the rule component. Imitation and inductive structural drills failed to produce a sufficient grasp of the linguistic system. Current skills-oriented approaches emphasize the importance of a rich input and abundant experience, but they run the risk of similarly neglecting the conscious rule component. This risk seems to be relevant in school learning contexts with limited instructional time (2-3 hours per week). Comprehension approaches, language teaching games and awareness activities seem to rely on the learner extracting the rules from meaningful, comprehended input data through internal reflection, without explicit teaching. Experiential learning theory offers an integrated view and suggests that all of these may to some extent result in incomplete learning, with a full cycle requiring a dialectic interplay between the four modes of learning.

The experiential learning theory adopted in the present study sees learning as a continuous process that involves resolutions of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of learning. In language learning there is thus a tension between conscious, rule-based learning and unconscious acquisition. Personally relevant and meaningful experiences of language use constitute the essential experiential basis for language development. But a conscious awareness of the rules is also considered necessary, as this constitutes a map of the language and gives the learner a basis for rule-dependent generalizations and anticipations. The transformation of experience takes place along the dimension between reflective observation and active experimentation, where risk-taking is an important element. To gain new experiences and reflect on them, the learner needs to be both an actor and an observer. How this tension between active experimentation and reflection is resolved is a matter of personal preferences and learning orientations.

2. SOME THOUGHTS ON EXPERIENTIAL SYLLABUS DESIGN

The term **syllabus** refers to the form in which the linguistic content of a course is specified, involving the choice and organization of the content (Richards & Rodgers 1986,21). Syllabus design thus

includes the stages of diagnosing learner needs, formulating the objectives, selecting and organizing the content, selecting and organizing learning experiences, and determining what and how to evaluate. Syllabus design attempts to integrate the educational goals with learner age, needs and interests and with current views of language learning, aiming to facilitate learner progress in the light of this understanding. Requirements of economy and efficiency suggest that we utilize the available instructional time with a maximal benefit for learning and learner development.

While there is no question about the importance of a grammatical component as part of the target competence, the issue is **how** the knowledge of the system could be best imparted to the learner, as Rutherford (1982, 21) points out. The theory of experiential learning suggests an integrated view of an intuitive, experiential "feel" for the language and awareness of its grammatical system, but the question is what elements are brought to learner awareness, and how and when it could best be done.

Traditionally, the assumption has been that successful language learning is equivalent to the cumulative mastery of sequentially introduced grammatical units. Such units are based on a hierarchical description of language at the customary linguistic levels ranging from phonology and morphology to syntax and semantics. The units are presented to the learner in a sequence that is assumed to reflect their order of difficulty in learning, starting from what is believed to be the simplest grammatical categories, usually the present tense. The input is thus carefully controlled and graded for structural complexity, the tacit assumption being that language is a cumulative phenomenon. Mastery of the previous unit is therefore considered necessary for proceeding to the next grammatical category. This syllabus type can be called the **unit accumulation approach**, as suggested by Rutherford (1982, 22).

The unit accumulation approach is, of course, thoroughly familiar to every language teacher, being the dominant type of syllabus until quite recently. It is certainly one possible way of selecting and sequencing the the data about the foreign language. But the big question is: is it the best way? It seems now that the traditionally unquestioned assumption of structural grading needs modification, particularly as regards elementary learning by children.

One problem with structural grading is that the categories of linguistic description may not necessarily be the units of acquisition. Thus the teaching sequences may not coincide with natural learning sequences for the child. The traditional model assuming that what goes in will also come out is probably too simplistic to capture the complexity of language learning. It is well-known that the teaching input is not always the same as the learner's intake. As noted above, learner output that is unmodified input could be

better called throughput. It is essential that the learner does something personally meaningful to the input in order to comprehend and thereby internalize it. Grasping the new linguistic system is a gradual process of cognitive maturation where learners will proceed at different rates. It seems useful to make a distinction between the external syllabus referring to teaching sequences as specified in formal syllabuses, and the internal syllabus referring to internal processing of the language data by the learner.

Learners seem to be predisposed to organize the input in certain ways. An interesting aspect of this reorganization has emerged in a number of studies of the acquisition of the English morphemes in natural contexts of language use, i.e., when the language is used as a medium of communication (and not as an object of formal study). There may be a "natural sequence" of morpheme acquisition which is quite similar in the context of both mother-tongue and second-language acquisition. In the latter case, it also appears to be similar with both young and adult learners, even regardless of their L_1 background.

The acquisition of the morphemes in English appears to take place in sequences of groups of morphemes reflecting developmental stages as follows (Krashen 1982; Dulay *et al.* 1982; Littlewood 1984,39):

Group I: present progressive *-ing* (as in *boy running)*
plural *-s* (as in *two books)*
copula *to be* (as in *he is big)*
Group II: auxiliary *to be* (as in *he is running)*
articles *the* and *a*
Group III: irregular past forms (as in *she went)*
Group IV: regular past *-ed* (as in *she climbed)*
third-person-singular *-s* (as in *she runs)*
possessive *-s* (as in *man's hat).*

The morphemes in group I tend to be acquired before those in group II, while there is variation within each group. The groups thus suggest an average acquisition order for the nine morphemes. The hierarchy probably depends on factors like the frequency of the forms in natural speech, the ease with which a structure is seen or heard, and communicative importance. As there is considerable individual variation within each stage the transitions between them are not clear-cut, and they are difficult to discern in a learner group. Thus it is difficult to obtain quantitative criteria for determining when a given structure has been acquired by a group of learners.

How far such knowledge is expedient for sequencing the external syllabus content in formal language teaching is an interesting

question that needs to be considered carefully. It has been suggested by Pienemann (1985) that the syllabus should, in fact, be sequenced according to such a common order of morpheme acquisition and that learners should not be allowed to move to the next sequence until they are ready for it. Similarly, they should not be expected to produce structures which are "impossible" at a given stage. A further implication is that one should be careful about what structures to correct and when: correcting grammatical forms that belong to one of the "following" sequences may not be beneficial for the learners and can be wasted time. Thus a knowledge of such stages may be useful to the teacher, as he can attempt to work in accordance with them rather than against them when designing teaching sequences and giving feedback to the learner.

However, Pienemann's argument has been criticized by Long (1985) and Candlin (1984) on both linguistic and pedagogical grounds. They point out that the stages are difficult to determine accurately in any case because there is a great deal of individual variation both within and across the stages. Besides, language development does not seem to be uniform for all areas of grammar: those learners who are at a given stage for one structure are not necessarily at the same stage for the other areas. Thus the hierarchical structure of the linguistic system implied by the stages is, in fact, still an open question and needs further research. And even though the relative order of the stages is fairly similar for all, learners will progress at different rates in the process of internalizing the structures. Thus the FL learner continuum in a given classroom contains learners that show differential progress in different areas of grammar. This makes it also pedagogically difficult to group learners strictly on the basis of their stage of acquisition.

The structure-centred, tightly ordered unit-accumulation approach has also been questioned by Rutherford (1982) and Candlin (1984) on pragmatic grounds. Rutherford claims that it involves an impoverished view of what language really is and how it reflects reality. While pedagogical itemization may be useful, the discrete grammatical items are not sufficient as units of language use. Comprehension does not take place in an item-by-item fashion, but operates by heuristic "guesses" utilizing pragmatic and situational knowledge, in addition to the knowledge of what language is and how it is put together. This is why the very notion of "comprehension" is vague. As af Trampe (1986) points out, comprehension is a relative process in which the meanings of words and grammatical structures are learned gradually. It is quite possible to comprehend utterances without knowing the exact meanings of words, and a partial grasp of words makes it already possible to use them in communication. Meanings are thus fine-tuned in the

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process of language use. Semantic relationships constitute complex networks of associations and inference which are constantly modified and recycled by the learner.

This means that a great deal of linguistic organization at discourse level may, in fact, be very difficult or even impossible to "teach" explicitly. Rather, it is acquired gradually as a result of extensive work on meaningful language data. But explicit teaching may accelerate this process by drawing the learner's conscious attention to relevant linguistic properties. Such **meta-linguistic awareness** can help the learner to process the language data and gain a conscious grasp of the linguistic system, enabling him to understand the new language at a deeper level of awareness. Pedagogical itemization is also difficult to apply to the description of the thematic and typological structure of language, operating with concepts such as given and new information, and subject and topic prominence. The interplay of syntactic and thematic structure to convey meanings at discourse level is, however, essential for a proper understanding and appreciation of how language functions in authentic communication. Rutherford therefore suggests a new, pragmatic teaching unit: language organization at the level of discourse. The pedagogical grammar should reflect the view of language organization at the various levels of linguistic description.

These views suggest, then, that a strict grammatical sequencing is not the best solution in syllabus design. It may be, in fact, that an over-organized input impedes learning rather than promotes it if the order of presentation does not correspond to the learner's own scheme, his internal syllabus and sources of motivation and interest (Ellis 1981;1985). Language teaching texts written to display desired grammatical structures are notoriously artificial and can be boring. This is why suitably selected authentic materials, by having a communicative content as the starting-point, would seem to provide inherently better learning material: they can be more interesting for the learner and they generally show a variety of linguistic structures and vocabulary. While adjustments of difficulty levels will be necessary to ensure comprehension, the important asset of authentic materials is that they involve a recycling of structures and lexis, adding more details and subtler meanings at repeated occurrences of the same structures.

The communicative organizing principle of the syllabus thus shifts emphasis away from learning the language as an object of formal study on to meaningful communication. To ensure comprehension, grammatical structures can be first introduced as lexical items provided along with the corresponding mother tongue counterpart. Thus, for example, the past tense can be introduced quite early in an elementary syllabus as lexical items (e.g. *went, did, skated, visited,* etc); the rules could, of course, be given individu-

ally to learners asking for them. Introducing essential types of questions in the same way (such as *What did you...?, Where did you...?, When were you...?,* etc.) will make it possible to have meaningful conversation, in pairs and small groups, from the very beginning. This will encourage the learners to put their language into a communicative use, enabling them to get experiences of using the language as a means for self-expression and a tool of comprehending unseen (or unheard) texts and stories.

This approach has been emphatically argued by Krashen (1981;1982), who points out that the acquisition of the second language is possible when learners obtain comprehensible input and when their "affective filters" are low enough to allow the input "in". He claims that comprehensible input (CI) in a low filter situation is the only causal variable in second language acquisition and accordingly formulates his "fundamental pedagogical principle" as follows:

> Any instructional technique that helps second language acquisition does so by providing CI (1981,59).

While Krashen's view seems justifiable in contexts of second-language acquisition, the question of causality is probably not that simple in foreign language learning in a monolingual context where the learners have the same L_1 background. What works in naturalistic settings with plenty of time and communicative opportunities may not work equally well in school with limited instructional time. Due to his emphasis on input, Krashen seems to reduce learners, as it were, to recipients of input. But language learning is more than a matter of just receiving comprehensible input. It is also a matter of internal processing by the learner, becoming aware of the target language structures at a conscious level.

In Krashen's thinking there also seems to be an over-emphasis on comprehension, with the assumption that speaking will emerge on its own as a result of comprehended input. While production is generally preceded by comprehension/ perception, it is probably too simplistic to claim that the input will automatically be converted into productive output. Learner productions are not just a matter of ensuring the availability of further input; they also have an important role in stretching the learner's communicative resources and thereby enhancing and elaborating his communicative intake. We thus need both comprehension-oriented and skills-oriented contents in the foreign language syllabus. The syllabus also needs to contain elements of both unconscious experience and conscious awareness of grammatical structures.

These views of syllabus design, then, reflect the theory of experiential learning discussed in the previous section. A complete

learning cycle consists of intuitive, experiential data which is reflected upon, leading to an abstract conceptualization of linguistic rules, and followed by active experimentation yielding further experiences of language use.

Another important element in experiential syllabus design is the idea of a two-dimensional curriculum suggested by Wragg (1984,8-12). In this thinking school subjects are seen as constituting columns in a two-dimensional matrix. The columns specify the content areas and the cognitive aims connected with them. The rows in the matrix are constituted by the aims connected with the learner's personal and social development and the development of his thinking and learning skills, running across the content areas. They specify the school's educational intentions, the development of which is a shared responsibility of all teachers and an inherent part of learning in any subject. Saylor *et al.* (1981,250) suggest the following list of such goals, constituting a starting point for syllabus design in the framework of humanistic education:

1. Accept the learner's needs and purposes and develop experiences and programs around the unique potentials of the learner.
2. Facilitate self-actualization and strive to develop in all persons a sense of personal adequacy.
3. Foster acquisition of basic skills necessary for living in society.
4. Personalize educational decisions and practices - include students in the process of their own education via democratic involvement in all levels of implementation.
5. Recognize the primacy of human feelings and utilize personal values and perceptions.
6. Strive to develop learning environments which are perceived by all involved as challenging, understanding, supportive, exciting, and free from threat.
7. Develop in learners a genuine concern for the worth of others and skill in conflict resolution.

Such goals will influence the syllabus design and guide its instructional implementation. The syllabus is seen as consisting of subject-matter contents and processes connected with learning the contents. The contents and processes are consistent with each other, guided by the accepted curriculum guidelines.

In terms of selecting the syllabus contents, the central principle in experiential language learning is thematic: the syllabus is organized around suitable themes and topics. It is not grammatically graded, even though some simplification is obviously necessary in order to ensure comprehension. This approach entails a loose ori-

entation in syllabus design. The material is organized into thematic areas, and the introduction of lexical and grammatical material is determined by the context, i.e., what structures, expressions and vocabulary are idiomatic, useful and interesting in the given context. There is no "right" order for the themes or topics. This gives flexibility to the syllabus and allows the teacher to take up topical matters when necessary and integrate themes from other subjects.

Considerations of supporting learner initiative and self-direction and encouraging the learners' own contributions also suggest an open syllabus structure, whereby learners are invited to proceed in their language learning as independently as possible. If there is no "right" order for sequencing the material, it can be argued that any order that is meaningful to the learner is a "right" order for him. If the materials are rich, abundant and authentic and contain varying topics they will automatically take care of exposing the learner to a full range of grammatical structures over a period of several years. Similarly, authentic material will automatically ensure lexical repetition and recycling of the structures.

When the emphasis is on the communicative content, the structures are viewed through the contents, since structures obviously serve as the necessary tools for conveying information and expressing ideas, opinions, feelings, emotions, etc. Thus working on the contents also means working on the structures. To complete the experiential cycle, learners can be made aware of the communicative uses and meanings of grammatical structures as they occur in the texts that are studied in class and at home. Officially accepted materials are in no way superior sources of learning; learners can learn equally well from any materials that contain samples of educated language use. If they are encouraged to make choices according to their own interests and find and produce relevant materials on their own, the added effort might be conducive to better learning. This argument, then, suggests an open syllabus relying on learner initiative and thereby aiming towards autonomous learning.

In fact the very notion of the syllabus in the sense of careful advance planning and selection of the linguistic content is less relevant and may even become marginal in process-oriented approaches. Relying on learner initiative means that learners will select the contents for themselves by choosing the topics they wish to work on. How far open syllabuses are realistic in formal school contexts is an unresolved question. Some experimental work (Dam 1981,1982,1983a, 1983b) shows that this is possible to a large extent and can lead to the development of learner autonomy beginning from the elementary stage of learning the foreign language. A more cautious stand is taken in some other experiments, compromising between the traditional syllabus sequencing and learner-

initiated work in terms of inserting projects that are designed, carried out and evaluated by the learners as independently as possible (Huttunen 1986).

The establishment of a learning programme involves making decisions that concern aims, needs, objectives, organization of the work, work techniques and evaluation practices. The degree of learner involvement in these decisions can be clarified by asking the following questions (Riley 1984,127-30):

- who analyses the needs?
- who defines the objectives?
- who decides where and when learning takes place?
- who chooses the materials?
- who chooses the work techniques?
- who decides on levels and criteria for evaluation?
- who monitors the learning programme?

The more the decisions are taken by the teacher the more the system is teacher-centred. The more the learners are responsible for taking the decisions, the greater is their degree of autonomy. The extent to which the decisions are taken together, with the teacher functioning as the guide and helper, reflects a shared management of learning. Various combinations of sharing the decisions are possible, reflecting various degrees of learner-centredness.

While learner initiative may be stifled by teacher-initiated decisions and a rigid adherence to given materials, a totally open syllabus may run the risk of remaining unsystematic. Some balance between the two extremes seems thus advisable. Such decisions will depend on national curriculum policies and school authorities' attitudes, and on teacher and learner attitudes. Encouraging experiential language learning requires, in any case, an open attitude to learning and a commitment to fostering the learner's own initiative, interests and choices and his responsibility for his own learning.

A useful distinction can be made between a core and open syllabus. The core syllabus is the material that is meant to be studied together and learned by all as far as possible. This material includes common vocabulary and grammatical structures. The open material introduces learner choices according to their own interests. It can include a variety of materials at various levels of difficulty: stories, fairy tales, fantasy and imaginative materials. The material can be worked for essential contents only: what the story is about, where it takes place, who are the characters involved, and what happened and why, and what the learner thought about it. This part of the work can be done individually or as project work, and learners are encouraged to choose their own materi-

als and ways of working on them. Similarly, they can undertake projects to produce materials of their own. An important educational aim is the development thereby of the learner's self-direction and study skills: planning one's own work, choosing materials, evaluating the process, and learning to use various auxiliary materials such as dictionaries. In such projects differentiation takes place in a natural way, as learners will proceed at their own pace and use the language at their current level of proficiency, alone or in small groups.

This strategy of syllabus design can be seen as a combination of the learning and acquisition approaches, giving learners both naturalistic and instructed FL data. The **naturalistic data** is intended to lead to a subconscious acquisition of the foreign language. Such acquisition material is not meant to be analysed intensively nor "learned" thoroughly in the first place, while learners must understand most of it. Rather, they are exposed to a rich input material containing heterogeneous grammatical elements, and they are free to pick and choose whatever they wish from the comprehended input data. This part of the syllabus is meant to give learners a feeling of accomplishment, of being able to use the language in personally meaningful ways.

The **instructed data** constitutes a grammatical and lexical core within the thematic syllabus. This is the closed part of the syllabus that contains common vocabulary and grammatical elements. It is thus an accumulating body of language data that is meant to be learned and mastered consciously. The learner will have an awareness that he controls the new language at a conscious level and knows what he is learning. This will lead to a feeling of increased competence and confidence in the use of the foreign language. Learners are encouraged to take on "contracts" of vocabulary learning with an acceptable pronunciation and exact knowledge of the meaning. Initially the emphasis is on vocabulary learning, while grammatical rules are introduced systematically and summarized at later stages.

The learner will thus proceed along two "lanes" in his FL study: a faster lane introducing new material relatively quickly and giving tools for meaningful communication, and a slower lane capturing systematic generalizations from the acquired material. The fast lane can be seen as spiralling round the linear slow lane. The purpose of such a spiral syllabus is to give the learner both a sense of accomplishment in terms of being able to use the language, and a sense of competence in terms of being able to understand why and how the choices are made. An attempt is thus made to develop fluency and accuracy simultaneously and in interaction with each other.

In experiential learning and syllabus thinking there is a continuous tension between syllabus guidelines, syllabus contents and practical teaching techniques. If education is seen as an orderly and deliberate effort to aid the learner's personal development, and the curriculum is defined as the plan for providing sets of learning opportunities, some planning is obviously necessary. However, given the aim to support learner development in order to educate independent learners and adult persons, the question is: What could be a suitable balance between a totally open and a closed, controlled syllabus? While an open syllabus may mean inefficient work and lead to undesirable, incoherent and unsystematic learning, the closed syllabus may stifle learner initiative and lead to superficial learning. Proceeding at the same pace in the class may even prevent fast learners from using their full capacity for learning. There is thus an interesting tension between advance planning and open, learner-initiated work.

There are no easy solutions to these problems. Probably the only productive answer is the educator's professional thinking and awareness of both possibilities and realities. As Kolb (1984,29-31) points out, such tensions are an inherent part of experiential learning, where learning is, in fact, seen as a tension-filled process leading to new knowledge, skills and attitudes through resolutions of conflicting tendencies. Tensions are thus not seen as discouraging but as beneficial forces leading to a deepening understanding of the processes involved. While working within the constraints of current realities, we must have a vision of the ideal situation to aim at, as this provides the direction for progress.

The ways in which conflicts are resolved will affect the quality and level of learning. This leads to a critical awareness of the kinds of learning tasks that learners work on. As teachers we have to ask ourselves how the tasks we set facilitate the learner's personal, social and cognitive development and how we might help him to grow as a learner, thereby enabling him to continue his own learning independently. Besides syllabus contents, this is also very much a question of the classroom atmosphere, the quality of human relations in the class, and practical teaching arrangements.

3. TECHNIQUES AND HUMAN RELATIONS IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Following customary distinctions (cf. Richards & Rodgers 1986, Larsen-Freeman 1986), an **approach** is seen as a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language teaching and learning, describing the subject matter to be taught. An approach can include several methods, whereas a **method** refers to an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material. While an approach is axiomatic, a method is procedural and com-

prises both theoretical principles and practical teaching techniques. The principles represent the theoretical framework of the method, while **techniques** are the classroom activities and procedures derived from an application of the principles. An appreciation of any method and the techniques associated with it requires thus an understanding of the underlying theoretical principles. A technique is implementational, aiming to accomplish an immediate objective. Just as methods are based on a given approach and reflect its theoretical orientation, techniques must be consistent with a method and thereby in harmony with the approach as well. An approach is thus a level at which assumptions and beliefs about language and language learning are specified; a method is the level at which theory is put into practice, and a technique is the level at which practical classroom procedures are described.

There is no uniform "experiential learning method", and it is probably not even desirable to aim at any one method; it is perhaps more advisable to talk about options and possibilities. Thus within the general experiential orientation to language learning, there are several interesting approaches and methods that are worth exploring and experimenting with. As there is no empirical evidence of the superiority of any one method over any other - and such evidence is indeed very hard to get at given the complexity of the variables - the methods are not seen as competitive. There is no "right" method that is equally suitable for all learners and teachers. We might therefore avoid dogmatism and regard the various approaches and methods as possible alternatives which will appeal differently to different teachers and learners and are subject to modifications depending on teacher personalities and the teaching context. Choices between them are considered in the light of the educational situation and personal preferences, based on assumptions and beliefs about FL learning.

Professional thinking is thus based on an understanding of the values and assumptions that underlie a given approach. This includes an understanding of the theoretical principles that constitute the framework of the method and manifest themselves as classroom activities and teaching techniques. Teaching involves making choices and decisions all of the time, both consciously and unconsciously, and under the pressure of frequently having to respond quickly. But as Larsen-Freeman (1983, 1986) points out, such choices might be informed choices, based on an examination of one's own beliefs and views of learning and teaching, and an awareness of the possibilities and the likely consequences of various optional decisions. A teacher who is informed about the options is able to make principled choices and can understand better what he does and why he does it, i.e., how his choices relate to the factors

that are conducive to efficient FL learning, and how they bear upon the educational goals and instructional aims.

While certain techniques are associated with particular methods and the theoretical principles underlying them, most techniques can be adapted to any class level and teaching style and situation. Larsen-Freeman (1986,2) makes an important point by saying that

> it is not so much the technique itself as the way a teacher works with it that makes the difference.

Techniques are thus not all-important: more important is the teacher's personality and his sensitivity to perceive and interpret the learner's situation. In an important sense the teacher himself is the most important teaching "tool", with his empathic capacity to understand other people and relate to them. As Wilenius (1982,35) points out, the teacher's self-awareness is an important part of his methodological knowledge. This awareness relates to a knowledge of the educational goals and the context of education and contains an element of making observations in class. Such observations are necessary for an understanding of the learner and reflecting on the possible consequences of the teacher's pedagogical actions.

These views, then, underscore the significance of the human element in the choice of teaching techniques. Rather than using various techniques mechanically and in a routine way, it is important to aim at an understanding of the broad educational context and the learner's situation. The teacher needs to clarify for himself his fundamental educational orientation, i.e., what constitutes "good" language learning and teaching for him, and to what extent this is in accordance with the educational goals and instructional aims as he understands them here and now. Building on such a conscious approach and its assumptions of learning, there are various ways of organizing the work, and techniques and classroom arrangements can vary. Besides, different techniques are likely to have different strengths and weaknesses, and some may be better applicable to different areas of learning the language, or different learners. Thus an orthodox, dogmatic adherence to any method or a limited set of techniques is not desirable; rather, one might aim to develop a flexible teaching style. But flexibility does not mean an uncritical acceptance of anything; being eclectic does not mean a haphazard collection of techniques. The choices of methods and techniques are based on a professional understanding of the possibilities in relation to educational goals, instructional aims, personal preferences and the learners. This point is also made by Larsen-Freeman (1986,3), who says that it is the teacher who has to view

the methods through the filter of his own beliefs, needs, and experiences. It is the teacher who has to make the informed choices.

In the spirit of encouraging learner growth, it is instructive to reflect on the very notion of "learner-centredness". The notion seems to be generally regarded as synonymous with work done alone on activity books or in pairs or small groups, as opposed to frontal instruction where the whole class is controlled by the teacher and proceeds at the same pace. Such kinds of work have for good reason come to occupy an important place among language teaching techniques. While frontal instruction has traditionally been considered economical in that the same contents can be taught simultaneously to the whole class, this notion of economy may not be valid in mixed-ability groups where there is a wide range of variation in learner abilities and skills. Frontal instruction of a given structure, for instance, is not so economical as it appears to be if fast learners already know it and slow learners are not able to comprehend it yet. Where this is so, the economy of frontal instruction applies only to mid-range learners. Adapting teaching to a wide range of learner ability requires a reconsideration of traditional pedagogical thinking.

But it is also instructive to reflect on how "learner-centred" work in pairs and small groups really is in the light of the notion of self-directed learning. It seems to be a common practice for the teacher to set the task for the groups, define the contents or exercises to be done, and how and when they are to be done, reported and checked. Thus it can be argued that much of this "learner-centred" work is still, in fact, "teacher-centred" to a great extent, as the teacher is in charge of initiating and controlling the process. Thus more importance needs to be attached to the learner's role in defining the objectives and setting the task, deciding on the contents and ways of working on it, and evaluating the results.

At a deeper level, learner-centred approach involves a basic trust in the learner's will and ability to cope with these tasks, and a respect for his person and his choices. On the basis of such a relationship, the learner can be given an element of initiative, according to his interests, in undertaking the task, choosing the contents and evaluating his work. In this way he will develop a feeling of responsibility for his own learning. If the teacher is "in charge" most of the time, the learner's own responsibility cannot develop. It is thus necessary to shift the emphasis onto the learner and gradually allow more and more room for the development of his self-direction and his responsibility for his own learning.

When languages are taught to the whole of the age group, the range of learner differences is bound to be large. In such a context it seems that a learner-centred approach, encouraging learner initiative and responsibility, needs to be considered seriously. As it

seems difficult to differentiate teaching to cater for the wide ability band, having the class proceed at the same pace under the teacher's control can be undesirable for both slow and fast learners: while the progress tends to be too demanding for the former, it is usually too easy for the latter. For fast learners, teaching may even impede learning in the sense that they are not offered incentives to work hard enough, having to wait for slower learners to catch up. Reducing frontal teaching and increasing learner-initiated independent work alone and in small groups can therefore offer pedagogically better ways of organizing the work.

This thinking entails a shift towards contract-learning whereby learners take on contracts of variable sizes, depending on their interests and abilities. Fast learners are encouraged to undertake demanding tasks involving both fluent and accurate language use, while slower learners can take on less demanding tasks. Essential in this thinking is the teacher's trust in the learner's capacity to make decisions regarding his own learning, and his support of the learner's work. This means accepting different aims for different learners and helping each to proceed as far as possible in his learning.

The notion of the teacher as a researcher constitutes an important element in experiential learning. This is connected with the process-oriented view of accountability: guiding learner progress is not possible without some knowledge of the learner's current situation. Thus a process-oriented view of learning also implies a process-oriented view of teaching, and both will develop simultaneously and in interaction. Teaching is seen as a profession in which it is possible to grow and develop, by deepening one's understanding of learning processes and knowledge of learners. Functioning as a guide, facilitator and counsellor of learning implies an understanding of the learner's situation and a personal relationship with him. Teaching involves making constant decisions regarding the learner, and to be able to make informed choices the teacher needs information about the learner's situation and possible consequences of his choices for learner development. Learner-centred learning does not mean leaving the learner alone and without support; the teacher's role is, in fact, even more important than in teacher-centred instruction. Being a researcher of one's work entails a reflective awareness of and a deeper involvement in it. Rather than "covering" the textbook and "giving" the lessons in a mechanical fashion, the teacher becomes an innovator of his own work.

In experiential learning there is thus a shift of attention from materials and techniques to personal relationships and experiences. Techniques are not seen as all-important in their own right. In fact, most techniques can be adapted to any teaching situation.

Thus it is not so much the technique itself as the way in which the teacher works with it that makes the difference. Different techniques will focus on different aspects of the learning and appeal differently to different learner and teacher personalities. The essential question is what the learner does and how it is connected with the desired outcomes. Experiential learning suggests a view of learning as a continuous process of recycling and refining previous learning, to arrive at a better understanding of the contents to be learned and oneself as a learner and human being.

The present review, then, suggests a multi-faceted approach to FL learning. By way of summarizing the discussion, the following four areas would seem to suggest a long-term programme for the development of the quality of FL learning:

> (1) quality of the input: comprehensible, rich, abundant, repetitive, grammatically heterogeneous, authentic as far as possible;
> (2) quality of the contents: communicatively relevant, meaningful and educationally well-grounded, relevant for learner needs and interests, appealing to fantasy and imagination, encouraging personal expression;
> (3) quality of processing: learner involvement and challenge, aiming at deep-level processing and stretching communicative skills through an effort to be more comprehensible, and encouraging the development of learning skills and learner independence; and
> (4) quality of the learning atmosphere: supportive, attempting to reduce the feelings of threat and anxiety, encouraging risk-taking and the development of self-esteem and a healthy self-concept.

These ideas need to be related to the practical administrative constraints of school learning, but they seem to provide a challenge for the development of FL pedagogy. Experiential language learning is seen in a wider context of developing the learner's total personality. Learning is effective when it involves the learner intellectually, socially and affectively. Foreign language learning can be a life-long pursuit. Within the available instructional time, the school can only give the necessary basic skills enabling the learner to continue learning on his own, given the need and motivation to do so. To the extent that the school can help the learner to see himself as a better learner, he may be increasingly able to make a full use of his learning potential. An important affective aim in school learning is thus to create rewarding experiences of being able to use the foreign language in personally meaningful ways, gaining positive learning experiences.

It is important for the teacher to clarify for himself his basic "educational philosophy" and relate this to the official educational goals and instructional aims. This gives him a fundamental orientation to the work and provides criteria for the choices of instructional contents and classroom activities. It can perhaps be said that the most important pedagogical innovation is the teacher himself, his pedagogical thinking and personal qualities. The quality of learning is linked to the quality of teaching, classroom arrangements and learning atmosphere. Experiential learning attempts to meet these challenges and provide a framework accommodating various alternatives, without losing sight of a holistic view of language learning and education.[1]

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